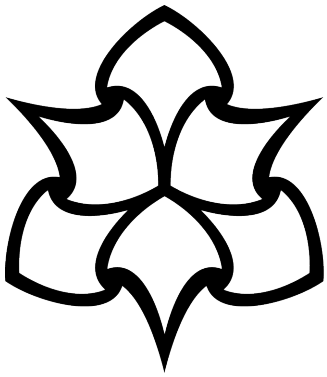

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What emotional-centred challenges do children attending special schools face over primary–secondary school transition?

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Primary–secondary school transition encompasses multiple social, academic and environmental changes which can negatively impact children's emotional well-being. Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (SEMH) are believed to be especially vulnerable during this time. However, the voices of children with SEMH are heavily underrepresented in this field within practice and research. The present case study examined how children with SEMH difficulties within one special school experience primary–secondary school transition and how they are supported, in order to make recommendations to improve this period. The case study was qualitative and longitudinal, conducted over 18-months and methodologies included ethnographic observations, child photo-elicitation focus groups (with 11 Year 6 children) and three adult interviews. Findings demonstrated that over primary–secondary school transition children with SEMH difficulties (a) negotiate significant structural changes in support (often unanticipated) and (b) need to feel a sense of *safety* and *belonging*. To manage this effectively, transition provision for children with SEMH difficulties needs to consider their short-term emotional well-being whilst still in primary school, in addition to their long-term well-being looking ahead to secondary school. Greater collaboration and communication across schools and stakeholders can help ensure children receive continuity in standards and support.

Introduction

Primary–secondary school transition can be a difficult, uncertain time for all children. However, children who face added risk factors at the group level, such as lack of social support, or risk factors at the individual level, such as limited coping skills or special educational needs (SEN), are particularly vulnerable to a poor experience of transition (West, Sweeting and Young, 2010).

Children with special educational needs (SEN)

As outlined in the Children and Families Act (2014) 'A child or young person has special educational needs if he or she has a: learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her, a significantly greater difficulty in learning than the majority of others of the same age, or a disability which prevents or hinders him or her from making use of facilities of a kind generally provided for others of the same age in mainstream schools or mainstream post-16 institutions' (Children & Families Act, 2014, section 20). The decision of whether a child has SEN is based on diagnostic information in addition to collaborative information from parents, consultants and educational practitioners. In the United Kingdom, 14.6% of children have a statement of special education needs (SEN). As shown cross-culturally, children with SEN tend to report lower levels of subjective well-being (Moreira et al., 2015), experience feelings of rejection, face greater emotional and behavioural difficulties and show poorer academic performance (Gaspar et al., 2016) than children without SEN.

Although, not all children with SEN face difficulties over primary–secondary school transition, a significant proportion do, which has led scholars to believe that SEN can be a direct and indirect risk factor. For example, children with SEN report more anxieties, and perceive changes associated with primary–secondary school transition more negatively both pre- and post-transition than mainstream peers (Hughes et al., 2013). Children with SEN are also more susceptible to individual-level vulnerabilities, such as poor social competence, self-esteem and self-regulation, which have been found to be associated with poor transition (Bloyce and Frederickson, 2012).

However, our understanding of the experiences of children with SEN over primary–secondary school transition

is limited as few empirical studies (only 17% in Neal et al.'s (2016) review) include children with SEN in their samples. This is concerning given consistent evidence that children with SEN face additional difficulties over transition (Hughes et al., 2013) and may need additional and potentially differentiated support. Neal et al.'s (2016) longitudinal study, which evaluated the impact of cognitive, behavioural and systemic primary–secondary school transition interventions in reducing post-transition anxiety amongst children with and without SEN, found support for this. Systemic intervention, which focused on creating consistency across primary and secondary schools, predicted higher anxiety for children with SEN but predicted lower anxiety amongst children without SEN. Due to the small sample size, no firm conclusions can be drawn as to which components of the systemic interventions were associated with transition anxiety amongst children with SEN. However, Neal et al.'s (2016) findings are consistent with Maras and Aveling (2006) in suggesting that children with SEN may need differentiated support for transition than children without SEN. It is well-established that children with SEN require tailored teaching approaches, modified to consider their specific needs; this same approach is likely to be useful within transition support intervention.

Furthermore, there are dangers in attributing risk to categories of children based on shared characteristics such as SEN, as SEN is not a homogenous group and there can be differences in the nature and number of specific difficulties (e.g. social skills deficits) children face, which can differentially shape transition outcomes. Therefore, in future transition research, broader inclusion criteria are needed so that children with different types of SEN are represented in study samples. This can be understood with reference to Eccles and Midgley's (1989) *Stage Environment Fit* theory, which recognises that individual differences between children make it important to match children's environment to their developmental needs.

Children with social, emotional and mental health difficulties

SENs are divided into four sub-groups: communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social, emotional and mental health difficulties (SEMH), and sensory and/or physical needs. Children with SEMH difficulties are defined as 'children and young people [who] may experience a wide range of social and emotional difficulties which manifest themselves in many ways. These may include becoming withdrawn or isolated, as well as displaying challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviour' (DfE, 2014, Section 6.32). Children with SEMH difficulties are believed to be especially vulnerable to a negative experience of primary–secondary school transition. At secondary school, children with SEMH difficulties report lower levels of happiness, inclusion and low teacher, parent and peer support (Currie et al. 2015). The number of children identified as having SEMH difficulties is continually growing, yet support provision to ameliorate the difficulties children experience within educational settings is minimal (Caslin, 2019).

Nonetheless, to date, no studies have specifically focussed on the experiences of children with SEMH difficulties leading up to and over primary–secondary school transition, which parallels broader educational research and practice, where the voice of children with SEMH difficulties is heavily underrepresented. This is the case even though children with SEMH difficulties exhibit lower feelings of school belonging and are more likely to receive punitive and exclusionary practices, which can only lead to further feelings of disempowerment (Mowat, 2019).

In the context of primary–secondary school transition, children with SEMH difficulties are likely to be more vulnerable to negative experiences and need extra support due to the challenges they face in managing difficult emotions and behaviours. Thus, it is particularly important that greater attention is placed on understanding the experiences of children with SEMH difficulties over primary–secondary school transition and how best to support them. While primary–secondary school transition represents a critical period for all children, for vulnerable children such as children with SEMH difficulties, successful navigation can provide a turning point in nurturing resilience and coping skills (Neal and Yelland, 2014). Thus, effective support provision for children with SEMH difficulties over primary–secondary school transition is critical.

Rationale

To date, we have a limited empirical understanding of children's emotional experiences in the lead up to and over primary–secondary school transition (author, 2020). This gap is widened when considering the perspective of children with added emotional difficulties, such as children with SEMH difficulties, who may be more vulnerable during this time, yet their voices are chronically underrepresented in research and practice. Thus, shedding light on this research gap, the present exploratory case study will take a holistic approach to examine the transition provisions of one special primary school (which specialises in supporting children with SEMH difficulties) to answer the research question:

1. What emotional-centred challenges do special schools face over primary–secondary school transition?

As raised by author (2019), Bronfenbrenner's Eco-Systemic Model of Development (1979), which acknowledges the multifaceted dynamic interactions between an individual and environmental systems, provides a useful theoretical framework to guide investigations into understanding developmental processes, such as primary–secondary school transition. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's

(1979) theoretical framework, the present research adds to contemporary theory by examining both proximal and distal influences to explore what provisions are currently being employed to support the emotional well-being of children with SEMH difficulties over school transition within a special school and the challenges the school faces in doing this.

Case studies are advantageous in providing holistic and detailed contextual insight, drawing on multiple sources, yet have been rarely used to investigate school transition. Thus, the present study makes further contributions to the field in mobilising an underused, yet valuable research design. Furthermore, the present case study is qualitative, which is a further strength. Within transition literature, there is a general dominance of top–down quantitative survey-based designs (Riglin et al., 2013) where participants are asked to respond to predisposed quantitative facets of adjustment. While, on one hand, such studies enable researchers to obtain a larger and wider spread of responses, directly asking participants to share their transition experiences using qualitative methodology can help us to better understand lived experiences inherent in the process and experience of this period of time (Ashton, 2008). Adjustment can also be subject to individual and environmental characteristics (Adeyemo, 2005). Thus, qualitative studies can evoke more in-depth insight pertaining to the experience of primary–secondary school transition.

Furthermore, practically, while some interventions have been developed to counter the negative outcomes children commonly experience over primary–secondary school transition, emotional-centred support provisions are limited in number and face challenges in both mainstream and special schools. See author (2020) for a full outline of limitations pertaining to emotional-centred primary–secondary school transition interventions. Understanding how children with added emotional difficulties, such as SEMH, are supported and cope with transition anxieties, on top of pre-existing difficulties, has useful additional implications for emotional-centred support that can be employed in mainstream schools to support transfer children who face similar concerns, but often express these to a lesser degree.

Method

Participants

Six Year 5 students (all male) participated in observations; 11 Year 6 students (10 males) participated in photo-elicitation focus groups and observations; two Year 5 class teachers participated in observations; two Year 6 class teachers participated in observations and one Year 6 teacher participated in an interview; one primary and one secondary school Transition Support Team teacher (PTST, STST) participated in observations and an interview; and six parents participated in observations. The special school is located in the West Midlands and has a population of 50 children aged between four and 11 years old who are mostly male, which represents the uneven gender distribution of children with SEMH difficulties (Hamblin, 2016). All children attending the school have been referred from local authorities, as the child's needs could not be met in a mainstream setting.

Design

Using a qualitative longitudinal 18-month case study design, methodologies included ethnographic observations, child photo-elicitation focus groups and adult interviews.

Procedure

Ethical approval was obtained from Keele University's School of Psychology ethical review panel prior to data collection, as was Head Teacher consent and informed participant consent (assent and parental opt-in consent for children). To protect participants' identity, audio-recordings and transcripts were anonymised at source and stored on password-protected computers. Following data collection, participants were thanked, debriefed, offered the opportunity to ask questions and pointed to sources of support.

Photo-elicitation focus groups. Due to the children's limited sociolinguistic repertoire and difficulties in sharing feelings, photo-elicitation focus groups were conducted. To do this, all Year 6 children had one week to take 10 photographs (using a disposable camera provided), which reflected their feelings and experiences leading up to primary–secondary school transition. Two photo-elicitation focus groups were then conducted, one with six and the second with five Year 6 children. The focus group participant numbers are consistent with previous research and considered optimal for this age group, given the topic under investigation and the children's additional special educational needs (Clark, 2009). The focus groups were unstructured and child-led.

Interviews. Twenty-minute semi- structured interviews with three members of staff were conducted.

Observations. To examine day-to-day transition preparations, 16 overt ethnographic observations (four in the morning and four in the afternoon) across two Year 6 classes were conducted; the Year 6 move-up day to the primary school's special feeder secondary school was also observed. To enhance our understanding of preparatory transition provisions, ethnographic observations were also conducted with the Year 5 children, and observations were made during three Year 5 student placement meetings, where the Head Teacher and Year 5 parents discussed potential suitable secondary schools, and one Year 5 secondary school parent visit. In addition, two TST teachers were shadowed for two school days, to examine preparations made to help

children make enhanced transitions from special primary schools to mainstream secondary schools. All data were recorded anonymously.

Data preparation

During each observation, detailed observation, theoretical and methodological field notes were made. As direct observation can be open to personal perspective, bias and validation (Wolcott, 2008), a reflective statement was written at the outset of this project. Focus group and interview audio-recordings were transcribed using verbatim transcription.

Data analysis

As the intent of the analysis was to describe, summarise and interpret surface-level patterns in semantic content from the whole sample; data were analysed using inductive Thematic Analysis within a contextualist framework, adhering to Braun and Clarke's (2013) six stages. Following on from data immersion of each transcript, the focus groups, observations and interviews were each coded separately for units of meaning. Semantic similarities and differences were then compared across each group of transcripts (focus groups, interviews and observations) and group of participants (child, parent or teacher) to generate bottom-up and data-driven codes. Codes were then analysed and combined at a broader level, to develop themes and sub-themes. Themes' external and internal homogeneity were reviewed and refined through discussion between first, second and third author.

Results

Four themes: *Conflicting emotions, Time vs. Timing of transfer provision, Balancing children's short and long-term emotional well-being* and *Child-centred provision* were identified across the focus groups, interviews and observations, which are introduced below in narrative order. Each theme has a differing number of sub-themes, as shown in Table 1, which are discussed separately below using illustrative quotes from participants.

Table 1: A thematic table of themes and sub-themes

1. Conflicting emotions		
Nervousness vs. excitement	Loss vs. progression	Managing children's conflicting emotions
2. Timing vs. Time of transfer provision		
Timing of when to begin transfer provision		Time for gradual provision
3. Balancing children's short- and long-term emotional well-being		
Safety and belonging	Enhanced transitions	Lack of child voice
4. Child-centred provision		
Past experiences	Tensions around continuity of support	Stretched workloads

Conflicting emotions

In the lead up to primary–secondary school transition, children expressed conflicting emotions of *Nervousness vs. Excitement* and *Loss vs. Progression*. Staff discussed the difficulties *Managing children's conflicting emotions* due to their additional emotional needs.

Nervousness vs. Excitement. Children commonly shared pictures which represented conflicting feelings of nervousness and excitement: 'I took a picture of a fidget spinner because when you go to a place where you are really excited but scared as well you can feel weird in your stomach and my stomach was spinning so I took a picture of a fidget spinner' (Student 6). While some children felt confident disclosing how they felt, others found this difficult and either struggled to put into language how they felt: 'I have bubby feelings inside my body about going to secondary school' (Student 4), generalised them: 'people sometimes feel scared' (Student 9), or masked them, one child using an orange metaphor: 'I have got a picture of oranges here to represent nervousness because oranges are actually hiding under their skin' (Student 5). This was also shown in the observations, as children commonly concealed how they felt in class, and on transition visit days, refusing to talk to staff, until these emotions were too difficult to handle and resulted in uncontrollable outbursts. One child compared this to a light switch: 'I took a picture of this light switch because it is emotions that come on and off (Student 6).

Loss vs. Progression. Children's readiness for primary–secondary school transition shaped perceptions of whether leaving primary school was viewed as a *loss* or a *progression*. For children who were ready to move on, feelings of loss: 'this represents sad as I have only been at this school for three years and a half so I wish I had more time' (Student 1), were overridden by expressions of impatience: 'I took a picture of a clock, it represents impatience because I am pretty excited to go to secondary school' (Student 4), and optimism: 'I thought if I took a picture of a thumb up it represents that you can do it' (Student 11). These children saw secondary school as a progression and time of growth: 'I took a picture of a butterfly because like a caterpillar turns into a butterfly, it's like me being the caterpillar moving up to secondary school and turning into a butterfly' (Student 6). For children who felt less ready, often because they were less informed about their transition (see *Lack of child voice)*, expressions of loss: 'I am a bit upset and scared about leaving school' (Student 1) dominated. Losing friends was very concerning for these children: 'I am

worried that I might not see my friends because I have got some best friends here, and I might not see them at my new school' (Student 4) and reminiscing about primary school friendships was as a dominant coping strategy to overcome worries about not making friends at secondary school: 'if you are afraid that you will never have friends again think about your old friends at primary' (Student 9).

Managing children's conflicting emotions. Staff discussed the difficulties children have managing their emotions due to their additional emotional needs: 'Well-transitioned pupils have the ability to try and be open to trying new things and meeting new people but that can be hard for children with emotional problems and they can struggle' (Year 6 Teacher). To manage children's conflicting feelings towards primary–secondary school transition, staff discussed the need for direct strategies, such as move-up days, as long as they were sensitive (e.g. fewer older pupils, see sub-theme *Timing*), in addition to indirect preparations, such as moving on sessions and skills workshops with tutors within the Transition Support Team (TST), who were viewed as a: 'bridge to mainstream school or moving on' (PTST) and helped to position transition as a continuation rather than a loss.

In the placement meeting observations, parents were concerned about how to manage their child's feelings towards secondary school, as they feared unsettling their child and affecting their current emotional stability. As a result, delaying preparations and not including children in transition discussions until decisions had been made was a dominant strategy: 'there is communication that happens between myself and the TST and parents about visits, but they [parents] are sort of reluctant to include their child' (Year 6 Teacher).

Timing vs. Time of transfer provision

Balancing *timing* of when primary–secondary school transfer preparations should be initiated, and *time* to prepare children gradually for the move to secondary school, was sensitive and an ongoing dilemma, subject to change each year to match cohorts' needs. However, what remained consistent was consideration of children's specific additional emotional needs and their ability to cope.

Timing of when to begin transfer provision. For school staff, there was uncertainty around the timing of *what* primary–secondary school transition provisions to initiate and *when* to do this due to the difficulties children at the school faced in managing emotions: 'these children are so emotional and can lack that resilience. We have had those visits (transition days) in the past and it has caused a problem, whether we do a workshop, I don't know it is a tricky one' (Year 6 Teacher). Lessons learnt from past cohorts also shaped decisions: 'A couple of years ago, we were asked to not come in so early as it left them with a few weeks of the boys being really unsettled, they were ready to move on, they were cutting their ties with the relationships they had got and it was making it quite hard for everybody' (STST).

The impact of poor transition provision *timing* and especially the impact of visit days on children's behaviour in the classroom shaped these decisions. As the transition period approached, emotional unsettlement was visible in the observations through changes in Year 6 children's behaviour in the classroom, most children unable or lacking motivation to focus on classwork and displaying acting-out behaviour. One Year 6 class teacher described this as 'year six-itus': 'so if we talk about the transition period, I call it year six-itus, they struggle towards the end knowing that they only have X number of weeks left' (Year 6 Teacher).

There were individual differences in how children responded to the timing of transition provision, some children needed exposure to the secondary school they would be attending and what secondary school would be like in order to feel prepared. However, other children were not ready for this until later, and if initiated too early, this provision could cause problems: 'I think either they were excited to be going and that was it they had enough of [named school], but more often was the case that they may not have had a positive experience which then created a problem psychologically in the children here, because they don't want to leave and were quite anxious and worried going' (Year 6 Teacher).

As a result of this, not all children were fully informed about their transition to secondary school and felt uncertain: 'I have a picture of what's meant to be all black but it didn't come out right, and it was meant to be representing confusion because I am kinda confused of what I am going to be doing next year' (Student 3). See *Lack of child voice*.

Time for gradual provision. School transition was discussed as best placed when there is time for gradual transfer provision. However, Year 6 has an externally set timescale, in that secondary school choice, decisions need to be made and transfer preparations initiated early. This means that practitioners do not always have a lot of time to gradually prepare children for their next chapter: 'we have transitions from pupils quite young back into mainstream schools, and they have worked really well because you are not on a timescale with them, because obviously now when they are in Year 6 going into Year 7 you haven't got all the time to do it, that is our window of opportunity, and it will end there; whereas, if we do it earlier, we can do it very gradually and slowly' (PTST).

Students were shown to pick up on this lack of time and feelings of rush and pressure towards transition: 'I took a picture of an exclamation mark because transition is

coming but probably in your head there will be sentences like oh my god where am I going? What will I do? At the end of those questions, there will probably be an exclamation mark' (Student 6).

It was clear in the observations that class teachers favoured gradual, open and transparent approaches when discussing transition in class, and teachers regularly sign-posted similarities between primary and secondary school. This was also discussed in the interviews: 'I say this is your last year, it's up to you how you want your year to go and then as we get closer I say alright we have so many weeks left, oh well we only have four days left etc.' (Year 6 Teacher). The same approach was taken to support parents: 'yes we start the moving on sessions and talking to parents as early as we can so we can prepare' (PTST).

Balancing children's short- and long-term emotional well-being

Staff discussed facing a conflict balancing children's short-term emotional well-being, especially feelings of *Safety and Belonging*, in the here-and-now at primary school, but also their long-term emotional well-being, by preparing them for secondary school where they may receive less support. Similar concerns were raised when considering *Enhanced transitions* to mainstream secondary school placements. However, children were not part of these decisions, as discussed in *Lack of child voice*.

Safety and belonging. Feeling *safe* and a *sense of belonging* at school was discussed as paramount for children to feel settled in primary school, especially when considering children's experiences of breakdown in previous school placements: 'we do everything in our power in terms of our school community to make sure that children have a positive impact and a positive vibe about the school because they used to go to other schools where they struggled' (Year 6 teacher). This was discussed by parents in transition placement meetings, where they outlined how their children's self-esteem, anxiety and problem behaviour (including self-control) improved greatly following transition to the special school as their child felt *safe* and 'fitted in'.

Teachers also discussed the bonds children have with the school: 'they form such an attachment to the school, I don't think there have been many cases where children come here and have not bought into everything that we offer them' (Year 6), but were concerned that this support and standards would not be matched at secondary school: 'Just because you are going to another special school it does not mean it will have the same ethos and environment that this has' (Year 6 Teacher). To support children to establish feelings of safety, belonging and support at secondary school, TST staff from the feeder special secondary school regularly visited the special primary school: 'I have been popping in so most have seen me before they have aged to come here which I think settles them as well' (STST).

Enhanced transitions. In placement meeting observations, parents discussed conflict between wanting their children to feel emotionally settled at secondary school, which they felt would be better nurtured within a special secondary school, but also wanting their child to not miss out on opportunities, especially academic ones, mainstream schools could offer. Transitions to mainstream secondary schools were called *enhanced transitions* and discussed as risky, as if unsuccessful they could emotionally unsettle children: 'they [parents] have the concerns about re-integrating into mainstream because if it doesn't work out it is another transition and I say this particular boy is showing real resilience and I think it is worth taking the plunge, but it is your decision as it can swing the other way' (Year 6 Teacher).

Lack of child voice. Although children gave a written statement outlining what secondary school they would like to attend, children did not attend placement review meetings or visit days where parents considered potential secondary schools. This was to prevent fears of offering false-hope and anxiety, given their past experiences of placement breakdowns (see *Past experiences*). However, students wanted to be part of these decisions: 'take us on a visit to our new school as opposed to letting just parents do it' (Student 3) and felt uncertain: 'in visits, you get to see the building and don't get scared' (Student 9), and anxious by not knowing: 'I took a picture of sand because I felt like this is like my mind thinking what will I be doing, where will I be going and stuff like that' (Student 8).

Child-centred provision

Children's individual vulnerabilities, triggers and *Past experiences* were at the centre of support provision within the special school and underpinned *Tensions around the continuity of support* they would receive at secondary school, whether children were transitioning to a special secondary school or making an enhanced transition to mainstream school, where more support was needed, as discussed in *Stretched workloads*.

Past experiences. The circumstances which bring children to the special primary school can vary; thus, consideration of children's past experiences were central in transition preparations: 'try to find out the child's individual past (. . .) then try to find the right place for them, and doing it at the right pace for the child' (PTST). One of the main concerns for transfer children and parents when considering transition was the possibility of past events being revisited at their new placement. This included fears of re-integration with peers from previous school placements: 'making other friends I might know from my old school that didn't come here is worrying'

(Student 5), but also ex-students from the special primary school: 'I am not looking forward to seeing the other people that left last year at secondary school' (Student 3).

School staff discussed the need for sensitivity, taking into account past experiences and relationships within school placement preparations: 'we find a school that we think is going to suit them because obviously due to their past experiences, we have to be careful which ones we identify' (PTST), and on visit days, especially to mainstream schools: 'because of course you are taking them back to mainstream and some of the children they won't have seen for quite a few years and they recognise each other and sometimes that can be good, but sometimes not good and it is the effect that can have on the child' (PTST).

School staff also discussed how parent anxieties can be picked up on by their children and shape their attitudes towards the transition: 'obviously parents have had a bad experience as well and sometimes they will say things around the child that affects how the children perceive mainstream school, so it can be quite difficult' (PTST). To prevent this, staff discussed the need to support parents through meetings, emails and telephone conversations.

Tensions around continuity of support. At the special primary school, the children received significant support to enable day-to-day school functioning, which is unlikely to be possible at secondary school: 'they are provided with everything, like they don't even have to take a pencil to school, or a pair of trainers, everything is provided, which is good when they get here because that is what they need, they don't need anything else going on in their head they just need to try and access everything as smoothly as they can without having to think of all those things, but obviously when they move on that is quite a different thing' (PTST).

However, dependence on this support can be problematic when the children transition to secondary school: 'I can see that children can be quite stressed moving on because they see it as such a big move, it is that growing up bit, that piece of where they have been in a secure environment and moving on to the unknown and these schools can be massive' (PTST).

Tension arose when children with SEMH difficulties were treated differently than other children at mainstream secondary schools when they faced emotional problems, as staff from the specialist primary school discussed being called upon when problems occurred to provide support for the child and staff: 'Just because he has come from a special school doesn't mean if he is having a wobble, he needs more support than other mainstream children. I didn't think it was right when he was struggling for me to go in and I spoke to mum about that, I said I don't mind speaking to him if you feel that is essential but from my perspective I think he needs to speak to his staff and make a success of it' (Year 6 Teacher).

Stretched workloads. Time is needed to recognise children with SEMH difficulties individual needs, vulnerabilities and build rapport: 'it takes time to build that relationship to know and to pick up on subtle changes and experiences' (PTST). Yet, it was clear across observations that resources to do this were stretched, as staff rushed from one placement to another, supporting several children at once. Teaching staff also picked up on this: 'I think we need more transition staff and we need more bodies to go and support these children at schools' (Year 6 Teacher).

Workloads were variable annually dependent on student cohort needs, especially how many children made enhanced transitions and needed 1:1 re-integration provision: 'For me, it is just about having a few extra bodies to facilitate transition to mainstream, but should we employ someone, next year we might not have any' (Year 6 Teacher).

Stretched workloads were also discussed as being time-dependent, greater pressure closer to primary–secondary school transition: 'certainly as it gets to the crunch end, the busy season as you like, the managers that came into the meetings was like I need support, I need people to go in and support children as I can't be at two places at once' (Year 6 Teacher).

Discussion

To date, we have limited understanding of children's emotional experiences over primary–secondary school transition. This gap is widened when considering how children with added emotional difficulties, such as SEMH difficulties, are supported, equipped and prepared for this time. Guided by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Eco-Systemic Model of Development*, the present exploratory case study set out to examine what provisions are currently being used to support the emotional well-being of children with SEMH difficulties over school transition within the special school, the challenges the school faces in doing this, and the implications this has for emotional-centred support provision that could be employed in schools more widely.

To do this, the present case study drew on 'multiple sources of information' (Creswell, 2016, p. 97) from interview transcripts to observation narratives, to provide a holistic, in-depth contextual analysis of the transitional experiences of children with SEMH difficulties. As discussed by [author] (2019), focus group methodologies are underused within this field, which is surprising given that this method can evoke honest and in-depth insight, as shown in the present study. Moreover, focus groups have been underused to facilitate discussion with more disfranchised samples, such as children with SEN and especially

children with SEMH difficulties, whose voices are significantly underrepresented both in schools and research. Thus, by directly asking children with SEMH difficulties to share their first-hand experiences, the present study has immediate implications in empowering our participants and made significant contributions to the field in elucidating the importance of valuing student voice in research and practice.

Resonating with recommendations discussed in [author] (2019) focus group study which examined transfer children's, parents' and teachers' retrospective experiences of primary–secondary school transition, the need to establish a balance between exposure and consistency in transition support provision is of similar concern when considering transition provision for children with SEMH difficulties. However, whereas, it was children who voiced the need for transition exposure to follow a continuum with a clear limit in the mainstream focus groups in [author]'s (2019) study, it was school staff and parents in the present study who held greater reservations regarding *when* children should receive transition support provision, *how* this should be done and *what* is the appropriate level of exposure. While this caution was discussed in relation to children's pre-existing emotional problems, previous school experiences and the implications too much transition exposure could have on children's short- and long-term adjustment, children discussed feeling voiceless and uncertain about their futures. This suggests a disconnect between adults and children's perceptions of what children need over primary–secondary school transition and the importance of child-centred research, such as the present, to unravel this.

This notion of powerlessness is not uncommon for children with SEMH difficulties, as while student voice opportunities are employed more widely for mainstream pupils, these initiatives are less popular and perceived as more challenging for children with SEN. Nonetheless, restricting student voice opportunities for vulnerable groups, especially in the context of high-risk situations such as school transition, supports 'deficit' and 'problematising' agendas leads to further disempowerment (Trotman et al.,2015).

Nonetheless, children with SEMH difficulties can be argued to be the best beneficiaries of student voice opportunities (Caslin, 2019), and a strength of the present research was the child-focussed photo-elicitation methodology, which helped the children to be heard and aided construction of unanticipated and meaningful responses. It was clear across the child focus groups that the children had a greater emotional understanding of primary–secondary school transition than adults may have realised. The children were also aware of transition provisions and discussions their elders shielded them from, such as parent secondary school visits, which the children voiced that they would have liked to have been part of to provide them with a greater understanding and *exposure* to their next stage in education.

Thus, by listening to children, educators can gain a deeper insight into children's understanding of events that are important to them, and adjust provisions to meet their needs, as opposed to being overly protective, cautious or anxious, which in the context of primary–secondary school transfer provision can cause children to worry more as shown in our previous research (author, 2019). In addition, giving children a voice in decisions that affect them can help children feel more in control, which for children with SEMH difficulties can have a significant impact on their emotional well-being and feelings of settling in at school (Norwich & Kelly 2006). In the present study, it was clear that children's lack of involvement and voice in school choice placement decisions, which their parents and teachers ultimately made for them, contributed to feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty about school transition, as the children could not anticipate changes. Thus, taken together, these findings provide greater support for the need to obtain first-hand insights from all stakeholders, including children, to fully understand and improve primary–secondary school transition.

Moreover, our empirical understanding of how to support children who face additional difficulties over primary–secondary school transition lags behind that of typically developing children, and for children with SEMH difficulties, this is non-existent. This research gap may in part be subject to assuming SEN is a homogenous group, which can lead to an inconclusive picture on how to support specific SEN populations, as children with SEN face varying strengths and difficulties that can differentially shape primary–secondary school transition adjustment (Maras and Aveling, 2006). Thus, by specifically investigating how children with SEMH difficulties cope with primary–secondary school transition and how they are supported, the present research has made preliminary, but nonetheless unique progress in demonstrating the importance of investigating narrower and more homogenous samples. This can help to ascertain a clearer picture of how to support more vulnerable children during this period in both mainstream and special schools.

Nonetheless, there can be vast heterogeneity within SEMH difficulties samples, even when sample sizes are moderate, as shown in the present sample of 11 children. As discussed in *Timing,* while some children felt more at ease following visits to their secondary school, for other children, this exposure was more harmful and impacted their day-to-day functioning for the remainder of Year 6. Thus, whilst children with SEMH difficulties on the surface may comprise a homogeneous group, as discussed repeatedly by TST staff in the present study, each individual child will have unique needs. This is subject to their specific vulnerabilities and past experiences, which can shape their experiences and readiness for primary–

secondary school transition provision. Thus, as implemented in the present special school, a 'one size fits all' approach is not suited to support children with special additional needs, and instead more personalised, idiosyncratic approaches are often best. This resonates to Eccles and Midgley's (1989) *Stage Environment Fit* theory, which outlines the importance of the *match* between children's developing needs and opportunities afforded by their social environments.

However, while it is well-established that children with SEN receive differentiated and modified teaching approaches to support their learning in the classroom both in mainstream and special schools, implementing tailored primary–secondary school support provisions are not always practical. This is especially problematic in mainstream schools, especially given pre-existing pressures teachers already face (Trotman et al., 2015), but intensive one-to-one targeted support can also be problematic in special schools, as shown in the present study. Staffing pertaining to school transition was especially stretched this academic year, as there were more children than usual negotiating an enhanced transition to mainstream secondary school, and limited time to spend preparing each child individually. Thus, further research is needed to ensure transition support provisions are sustainable.

In comparison to findings from our previous research in mainstream schools (author, 2019), the children, parents and teachers at the present special school placed greater emphasis on the importance of children feeling safe and a sense of belonging at secondary school. This concern was shown to override all other concerns and shaped decisions that implicated children's short- and long-term emotional well-being. These findings provide further support for the need to ensure that primary–secondary school transition support provision is sensitive.

However, educational practitioners also raised concerns that the intensive support children with SEMH difficulties receive at the special primary school, which they initially need to feel emotionally settled and comfortable within school, is unlikely to be matched at secondary school and can lull children into a false sense of security. This has been supported empirically; children with SEN have been shown to negotiate more structural changes in support over primary–secondary school transition than their peers without SEN, which can lead to lower post-transfer ratings of school adjustment (Hughes et al., 2013).

These findings may also be indicative of differences in SEN and typically developing children's perceptions. For example, it may be that children with SEN underestimate secondary challenges, by holding different appraisals and expectations to children without SEN. Children with SEN may also lack the skills to adapt, possibly due to their previous overreliance on support, as shown in the present study. Thus, to improve the transition period, there is need for collaboration between primary and secondary schools to ensure that all children are met with continuity in school standards and support, and for children with SEN, a more coordinated approach is needed. This recommendation provides further support for the Children and Families Act (2014) which discusses the need for an explicit planning process before a child moves to another school or setting, with information (including a review of the child's EHC plan) to be shared by the current setting with the receiving setting.

Comparable to our US focus groups (Bagnall, 2021), and in contrast to our UK focus groups (author, 2019), children in the present study freely discussed their feelings towards their emotional well-being in the context of primary–secondary school transition. This may be due to the strength of the photo-elicitation method which can help children construct more thoughtful answers. For example, in the present study, children had a full week to think about how they felt towards transition, take pictures to represent these feelings, and consider how to present this in the focus groups, which we felt was needed due to the children's special educational needs and the lack of voice children with SEMH difficulties have within educational research and policy (Caslin, 2019). Future research on this topic may also want to utilise this method.

The children's open discussion of mental health may also be indicative of the additional awareness and support children receive in special schools to aid emotional understanding and regulation, which may help to position mental health as less of taboo. For example, in the current special school, children are taught in small class sizes of no more than 10 children, staffed by a teacher and a teaching assistant. As discussed by previous researchers (Cooper, 2008), such intimate settings, which combine features of a standard classroom with a family-type setting, can not only help better meet children with SEMH's difficulties needs, especially when concerning emotional security and positive engagement, but also help to position emotional well-being at the heart of school practice. Understanding more widely the mechanisms through which special schools facilitate a more open approach to mental health has useful implications for mental health literacy provisions in mainstream schools for both staff and students. This is especially important considering that a fifth to a quarter of children and young people (CYP) with mental health difficulties are deemed inappropriate for specialist mental health support (Crenna-Jennings and Hutchinson, 2018), placing schools at the forefront to support many CYP with mild to moderate mental health difficulties (Department of Health and Social Care and Department for Education, 2018). The present research is not without its limitations. One limitation was the study's single case study design. On one hand, this was needed to provide detailed longitudinal contextual insight, into a marginalised population. However, the single case design limits the generalisability of the present findings to wider

schools as caution is needed when adopting practice from one context to another. Thus, there is need for further research with more special schools to strengthen confidence in the present finding's credibility and robustness.

In sum, the present study has made a significant contribution to the field by demonstrating the importance of investigating how children with more specific SEN difficulties, such as SEMH difficulties, cope with primary–secondary school transition and how they are supported, which to date has received limited attention. Given that emotional-centred support provision is limited in schools and research (author, 2020), understanding how children with added emotional difficulties are supported and cope with transition anxieties, on top of their pre-existing difficulties, has significant practical implications in informing emotional-centred transition support interventions. Finally, drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theoretical framework, using a case study design (which is underused within this field), the present research has made two further unique contributions. Firstly, the present research adds to contemporary theory by recognising both proximal and distal influences which impact the experiences of children with SEMH over primary–secondary school transition and how they are supported. Secondly, the present research makes further contributions to the field by mobilising an underused, yet valuable research design.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on what provisions are currently being used to support the emotional well-being of children with SEMH difficulties over primary–secondary school transition within one special school. In particular, it focuses on the challenges the school faces in doing this, and the implications this has for emotional-centred support provision, that could be employed in schools more widely. Given that CYP spend a substantial length of their childhood in school, a setting that has a huge impact on children's emotional, social and academic development and life skills (Taylor et al., 2017), greater focus on the school environment is significant, especially for children with SEMH difficulties whose voices are heavily underrepresented (Mowat, 2019).

The present study has made a unique contribution to educational research in understanding how children with added emotional difficulties are supported by others and cope with transition anxieties, on top of their pre-existing difficulties. By identifying factors at the proximal and distal level impacting this (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the present research also has implications for practice, especially in considering support provision. This includes acknowledging the additional structural changes (although often unanticipated by children) in support and standards across primary and secondary school, and the need for greater communication across systems and stakeholders to avoid this. In addition, the present study has shown that children with SEMH difficulties have a greater emotional understanding of primary–secondary school transition than initially anticipated by the adults who support them. This presents the need to consider children's voices in support provision, so that children feel more in control of their transition and provision is adjusted to meet their individual needs.

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